The Devil's Work

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"I have always said the first Whig was the devil," Samuel Johnson quipped, with sulphurous penetration. He was speaking of Milton, among other things. By 1778, when this acknowledgment was made, a man who had been a heretic even among Protestants had been long anointed England's national poet. Within the English literary canon, the justification of God's "monarchy" had been assigned to the care of a spiritual regicide. If rebellion, dissidence, and nonconformism reigned only in hell, where was the English cultural regime to be realistically situated?

"The Whig Interpretation of History" was not to be named as such until Herbert Butterfield did so, in 1931, but Johnson had already identified its theological undercurrent. Once a properly English historical process has established itself, dissent ascends predictably to power, interrupted only by increasingly fragile restorations. The ratchet mechanism is hard to miss. Roundheads become Whigs, then Liberals and Yankees, and then Progressives—and always, they win, at once domestically and internationally. In Ed West's perfect coinage, "the right"—conceived relatively, which is to say dynamically—is always on *the wrong side of history*.

In his introduction to *God and Gold*, Walter Russell Mead observes:

> Since the Glorious Revolution of 1688 that established parliamentary and Protestant rule in Britain, the Anglo-Americans have been on the winning side in every major international conflict.... More than 300 years of unbroken victory in major wars with great powers: It begins to look almost like a pattern.... We win, we think we see the end of history, we're wrong. This, too, begins to look a little like a pattern.

What is recognized here isn't *simply* the Satanic Juggernaut in process. Neither is it simply anything else. Spiritual regicide installs itself ever more securely at home, while propagating itself irresistibly abroad. This is the pattern we must understand.

"Spiritual regicide installs itself ever more securely."

Among the amusements of the broken and humiliated right is the search, backwards, for *where it all went wrong*. When *were* things last basically good? Do we have to regress back before the Civil Rights Act and 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act, as Christopher Caldwell proposes? Or as libertarians suggest, back beyond the collapse of the gold standard, as implicit already in the creation of the Federal

Reserve, and later FDR's gold confiscation? Or to some point before the closing of the frontier, in the late 19th century? Or back before the waves of expanding mass enfranchisement, beginning earlier in that century? Or, as from the perspective of religious traditionalism, might no sanctuary be found unless back before the break from Rome and the dissolution of the monasteries? Is everything since the 17th century, or even the fifteenth, irredeemable? All these proposals, and more, demand detailed examination. Yet if Protestantism, scientific revolution, liberalism, and industrial capitalism were already our fall, what imaginably could *we* be?

"When were things last basically good?"

For the English, this line of questioning reaches an inevitable destination. Where it went wrong was where it began. The English were always, already, the kind of people whose story would take this shape. At every important fork in the road, we have turned left. We always go wrong. Going wrong is what we are.

Whenever it is asked why any of these episodes took place, in the way they did, a cause is implicitly sought, which is the symptom of a deeper—underlying—malady. There is no bottom to be found outside ourselves. Satan lucidly understands this. As Milton quotes him in *Paradise Lost*:

Which way I fly is hell; myself am hell;
And in the lowest deep, a lower deep
Still threatening to devour me opens wide,
To which the hell I suffer seems a Heaven.

The greatest problem of the English right is easily stated. It lies in our communist ancestry. If "communist" seems initially hyperbolic, we must be patient in our understanding. (To justify the word, but not the thing, is the entire predicament.)

This task lacks all originality. Simply by "reading old books," Curtis Yarvin—under his pseudonym, Mencius Moldbug—provides an entirely adequate demonstration. The steps taken in his blog, *Unqualified Reservations*, are repeated here in other terms.

Yarvin's school of *neoreaction* is, among other things, the Whig interpretation of history apprehended—and accepted—from the right. *Cthulhu always swims left*, he observes. As Lovecraft recognizes, it was prophesied that "all the earth would flame with a holocaust of ecstasy and freedom." This "ultra-Calvinism"—which is always also its own opposite—originally encompasses everything the left can ever be. Never simply outside, it was also, despite its *Outsideness*, from the earliest beginning within.

The ferocious secularism of our contemporary left is deeply misleading. Its

theological amnesia is no more than a symptom of enthusiasm. The main current of radical dissent, in all its religious zeal, is only trivially disguised. But the left, here, is captured entirely by a failure of the right.

It is well understood that even American conservatives are liberals. The revolutionary origins of the United States ensure this. With England, it is not so very different. There, too, a comprehensive revolution severs all real threads of legitimate tradition. Whatever isn't rooted in the revolution is risible. After independence, loyalist "Tories" have no contribution to make to the American political order. They are simply *un-American*. Comparably, after the victory of Parliament in the English Civil War, the remnants of the old regime are no longer *English* at all, but rather *Normans*—francophone feudal aristocrats and Catholics. The category of "English Cavalier" is utterly voided upon inception. Thus is the clown mask prefabricated for the Whigs' "Tory" enemies to wear.

The crisis of Anglo conservatism is then best thought as an essential fatality, or chronic condition. From the middle of the 17th century, and again from the late 18th century, "Anglo conservatism" is born, and reborn, as a joke. Its *English* and then *American* characteristics are fundamentally inconsistent with any invocation of

legitimacy that reaches back beyond their respective revolutions. The only meaning attainable by either is that of *revolutionary moderation*. Even its moderation is qualified—moderated to a second, or higher, power. Its moderacy is strictly relative, and thus unprincipled, in principle. Building on such "foundations" could only have been problematic.

The scope and depth of conservative failure can seem nothing less than miraculous. Recent history has brought us to the stage of naked parody. Perhaps inevitably, projects of conservative restoration transition smoothly—and with stunning rapidity—into militant leftist movements. "Neoconservatism" is still less conservative than "neoliberalism" is new. The novelty of the latter is sheer concession, based on overt surrender of all social agency to the state. Neoconservative betrayal is even more clownishly cynical, reducible without remainder to the hijacking of a pre-established electoral constituency, for ends that terminate in pure foreign-policy adventurism. To accuse "neoreaction" of comparable cynicism would be to credit it with an altogether implausible spirit of practical effectiveness. It has been, at its best, far less a program than a lamentation.

The prefix "neo-" in English promises an amplification of liberty. "Neoliberal" means *freer than ever*. "Neoconservative" means

conservative only in the interest of freedom. "Neoreaction" means *reaction insofar as freedom demands it*. These are all promises, but not serious prophecies. If none of this makes sense to you, your problem is probably not with "neo-," but with English.

It isn't that freedom truly advances, evidently. It is only that promises—particularly including promises of freedom—become ever cheaper. What we know as "inflation" in monetary matters is a special case of this general phenomenon, marking the arrow of Whig-historical time. The deep trend is to lie about liberty more, in accordance with the alchemy of political modernization, in which ancient ideals are compounded ever more liberally with minutely calculated mendacities.

An understandable—though profoundly mistaken—assumption tempts us here. We might think that to "assert Eternal Providence,/ And justify the ways of God to men" would be to conclusively resolve the meaning of Satanic rebellion. Yet Calvinism isn't a settlement, but something closer to the opposite. It is the intensification of a problem beyond a threshold of infernally dynamic paradox. There is no doctrine of free will—whether secular or religious, affirmative or negative—that pacifies the ferment of libertarian mechanists, with their new purposes, and new machines.

Milton pushes the problem upstream. Man rebelled because Satan first rebelled. The entire tumult of Reform, including every question of equality, liberty, and monarchy, of obedience and dissent, is elevated to Luciferic pitch:

Who can in reason, then, or right, assume
Monarchy over such as live by right
His equals—if in power and splendour less,
In freedom equal?

There, in the meditations and machinations of the Ancient Enemy, the Empyreal clockwork of volition still turns, and burns, as it plummets through ever-more-hellish profundities. The turning is the thing, the engine. It was not built for peace, or cessation. Nor has it, by an iota, been subsequently advanced upon.

Solemn Providence envelops that which calls it into question. The Satanic torsion is ineluctable. To imagine defiance of Providence is already rebellion, so then, rebellion is still providence. Satanic subversion of the canon is itself canonical.

We Are Doomed, John Derbyshire concludes, with impressive concision. "So, you're saying there's a chance?"

"Satanic subversion of the canon is itself canonical."

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